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## REVISITING THE 1943 OF A FORTUNATE JEWISH YOUNGSTER

It is the twists and turns of private lives which lends its sheen to History; that is what we learned in school. This story is certainly about a turn in fortune.

For forty years I have wanted to make the acquaintance of Maud Coudurier. It has been 56 years since her mother saved my life, under circumstances of which I do not know all the details. I have never set down in writing what I remember about this and what people have told me about it, and there now remain only two witnesses, who were fourteen and ten years old at the time, my brother and myself. The others partially lifted the veil on the secrets and the ambiguities of the tragic night of 22/23 December 1943, and then they carried away the truth into the grave.

Through my mother I am descended from a Sephardic family originating from the Balkans. Following the death of my father in 1934, my mother, her father, her two brothers, her sisters-in-law and the children shared two dwellings in the Paris region from 1935 to 1941. My uncles joined the French army campaign from 1939 to 1940, but, was it bad luck? They were not made prisoners<sup>1</sup>. From 1941 to 1943, we were on a journey which was typical of some Jews in France: Aryanization of businesses, flight toward the non-occupied zone, first crossing of the line of demarcation (at Chéry-Lury), pillage of the deserted household, regrouping in a town in the southwest (Luchon), renewed flight toward the Italian occupied zone at the end of 1942, and transformation of the refuge into a mousetrap, after Italy changed camp in September of 1943. That month, the Nazis and Alois Bruner's men took control of the chase after Jews within the eight southwest *départements* of the southeast which made up the former Italian occupied zone.

These events found our tribe (seven adults, nine children) occupying a farm called the Hermitage, 500 meters away from the hydropathic establishment of Aix-les-Bains. The adults are aware that the threat is becoming clearer. Every day we receive news of new arrests of Jews in the *département* of Savoie. There is not a minute to lose: efforts to find a new hiding place begin to be put into action. Mother, Uncle André, and his wife Leah and their three children go to search for and find a new hiding-place in Mont Dore. "Florent," himself Jewish, prepares the falsified papers. To their misfortune, Mother and André return to Aix-les-Bains to fetch the rest of the family, but Leah and her children remain in Mont Dore. It is planned to depart in separate groups at the end of December, when, in the early hours of 23 December, the mousetrap snaps closed brutally.

Informing being very widespread at the time, it is probably because of a denunciation that the Gestapo, accompanied by a Frenchman, knocked on the door of the Hermitage shortly

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<sup>1</sup> To my knowledge, which is limited to personal observations, since I haven't read anything on the subject, the Jewish prisoners of war, nationals of Western countries, who had fallen into the hands of the Germans between 1940 and 1945, were sometimes victims of discrimination in comparison with their non-Jewish fellow prisoners, but were not included in the "final solution." Their story remains to be written.

after midnight on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of December<sup>2</sup>. I will not go into all the reasons which led the Nazi team which came to seize us to leave six children and two adults to remain where we were. The five others, Aaron (“Henri”), age 44, my mother Marguerite (“Denise”), age 37, Isaac (“André”), age 36, Estreia (“Estelle”), age 33 and my brother Philippe (“David”), age 14, were taken away to Chambéry and detained for a few weeks in Drancy, from where they were transported to Auschwitz by Convoy No. 66 of 20<sup>th</sup> January 1944. The four youngest survived.

My aunt Sonia, six months pregnant and allowed to remain free, told me: “They ordered me to stay put. I fear the worst. We shall leave within 48 hours.” Suddenly, we were being treated like lepers: no one, whether Jews or non-Jews, was willing to speak to us and even less willing to risk their freedom and their lives to take under their protection a woman, an old man, and six children who had already been recorded on a list by the Germans. It is then that salvation came to us. It came from Maisons Laffitte in the person of Marguerite Warren, the future mother of Maud. Marguerite was a friend and a former employee. It was decided that we would separate: my Aunt Sonia and her three children and both of her sister-in-law’s parents would go to meet Leah in Mont Dore, in Auvergne, and Marguerite would take my grandfather (69 years old), my sister (12 years old) and myself (10 years old) to her mother at Maisons Laffitte in order to hide us there.

By taking on the responsibility of bringing us to Maisons Laffitte and hiding us with her mother under a false identity, Marguerite was assuming enormous and multiple risks: Her father, a British citizen and trainer of race horses (Maisons Laffitte is the French capital for trotters) was being detained in Drancy for being an enemy alien, which already rendered him suspect, and here she was preparing to assist three Jews to cross the line of demarcation in violation of a German order of 1940, which would expose her to heavy sanctions which could go as far as deportation to Buchenwald. Aware of this danger, she nonetheless made the trip from Aix and entered the gates of the Hermitage on 26 December. That same day, the members of my family who had escaped arrest, Marguerite and the parents of Aunt Leah, who had already taken refuge in Mont Dore, altogether six children and four adults, set off for the Aix-les-Bains train station for what would be a momentous journey.

After arriving at Lyon-Perrache, the group was divided on the station platform. The Paris sub-group was still waiting on the platform when a thief ran off with one of the suitcases and leapt into a moving train, with my grandfather running after him, screaming for help at the top of his lungs. My aunt, mortified, heard the cries at the other end of the platform and recognized the voice. Marguerite came to calm my grandfather down, and the four of us got into the train for Paris.

A few moments later, I lived through the longest five minutes of my life: the train stopped at the line of demarcation and a German in uniform, an *unteroffizier*, I believe,

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<sup>2</sup> I do not know whether there were raids against Jews in the Savoy *département* in November and December of 1943. Several dozen Jews were arrested there in contrast with 1819 in the Nice region, where the team of Alois Bruner was active. This further supports my belief that we were the victims of an individual denunciation

walked up into the compartment and demanded: “*Papieren.*”. Marguerite hands him the forged papers. I do not recall any exchange of words. He examines the papers and his eyes meet mine for an instant which feels like an eternity. Then he hands the papers back, turns around, and leaves. We had all escaped deportation and death. I will never know if he knew that the papers were forged. Any response from us to the most banal of questions, such as “What is your name?” or “Where are your parents?” would have given us away.<sup>3</sup>

I have no memory of my arrival at Maisons Laffitte, but I have a vivid recollection of my stay of four or five months which, with time, has split itself into a series of unrelated snapshot memories: the senior Mrs. Warren, the school, a letter from Drancy, the evening prayer in my grandfather’s bedroom, the visits of Gaby Robin, a dear friend; walks along the edge of the Seine with Marguerite’s son Guy and with Mrs. Warren’s little dog; Thursdays spent in Paris with Gaby Ancelot and her nieces, at the movies, and the news reports filled with lies and the German propaganda films<sup>4</sup>; the reading in the press of the discovery of the mass remains of Dr. Petiot’s victims<sup>5</sup>, Mrs. Warren’s fear when Grandfather, eccentric as always, went to read the palms of the Germans in the neighboring barracks; the fact that a German saw me carrying a water pistol (I was afraid he could read my thoughts). But there is one snapshot which stands out from all the others: one evening in March or April of 1944, I saw from the balcony of the first floor of 23 Bellefrière Avenue a full-scale bombardment of the major rail intersection at Houilles-Carrières. Everything happened, just like in the movies: the red sky lit up by searchlights, at the top of which the white flak firing of antiaircraft batteries were reflected; the rumbling of the airplane motors, the deafened noise of the bombs exploding, reaching the ear one or two seconds after the glow of the impact is revealed. This is the only military action that I have ever witnessed.

No recollection remains in my memory of my departure from Maisons Laffitte. It was towards 1944 that Gaby Robin accompanied Grandfather, my sister Dora and myself to go meet my aunts in Mont Dore, where I spent the last months of the war in a small apartment with Grandfather, my sister and Gaby. Of the third and last crossing of the cursed line of demarcation there is no story to tell.

The Gestapo was not very active in Mont Dore; there were arrests of Jews in 1943, but not in 1944, even though there were relatively many of them who had taken refuge in this

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<sup>3</sup> I experienced an example of this type of question recently while crossing the border between Canada and the USA. I hand my American passport to the U.S. immigration officer. The passport bears my name, place of birth, etc. The officer asks me: “Where were you born? What is your nationality?” Annoyed by this routine, which only occurs at the Canadian border, I reply: “Why do you ask me these questions, you have the answers right before your eyes in my passport, which you have in your hand.” Normally the police do not like to have people ask them questions, but the officer replied to me: “Holders of falsified passports sometimes pass through here. If I ask them a question, sometimes they “screw up” in their answer. Didn’t the *unteroffizier* of Lyon Perrache know anything about this police routine, or did he knowingly choose not to apply it? Why?”

<sup>4</sup> The lies of the Nazi propaganda did not bother me. I imagined that the soldiers [working] the 88mm cannons were not Germans, but Allies. The “terrorists” of the short films were heroes for me.

<sup>5</sup> A notorious serial killer.

spa town of 10,000 inhabitants. The police superintendent would later tell Leah that he maintained two records bearing the names of the refugees: he showed the Germans the one where the names of Jews (falsified for all) did not appear. At Mont Dore I was a Cub Scout and a Catholic, going to church devotedly. As absent-minded then as I am today, I lost my wallet, and Grandfather, ever unconventional and oblivious, returned it to the police!

A very special memory marks the Liberation: when classes were back in session for the school year of 1944/45, in October of 1944, I believe, the instructor announced to the class that I had lived under an assumed name. My fellow students began to snicker and the instructor said, "Don't make fun of him. He can't help it that he's Jewish. It's not his fault if he had to conceal his identity."

We returned to the Paris region around February of 1945. The ups and downs of the reunion with the survivors of deportation and the readjustment to a "normal" life constitute another chapter of my life which I may write some day.

After the war, it was my mother, back from deportation, who maintained contact with Marguerite, who I have seen only rarely after my departure for the United States in 1951. I went back to Maisons Laffitte only once, for the burial of the senior Mrs. Warren. Marguerite remarried and had two daughters: Maud, born in 1948, and Rita, born in 1954. Mother always had me read the letters which she received from Marguerite, and in later years, from Maud, who enjoys corresponding in the finest French letter-writing tradition. Around 1980, Mother's health deteriorated, and she passed away in 1986. At that time, I took up the flame. Maud and I first contacted each other directly in 1988, at the time of an exchange of best wishes for the New Year of 1989. "I hope to have my mother for as long as possible, but on the day when she goes away, even if logically I may no longer hear from you, I want to tell you that my own children shall know of the high esteem which I have for you, not in the banalities of history books, but as the living proof of human generosity."

In 1989 my wife Susan and I visited Yad Vashem for the first time. While going down the Way of the Righteous, I thought about Marguerite and the idea came to me to nominate her for the Way of the Righteous. I wrote to the administration at Yad Vashem and they sent me the necessary documentation to apply for such a request. When I tried to contact Marguerite, I learned that she had left Maisons Laffitte to move in with Maud at Saint Laurent du Pont (Isère), situated 40 km away from Chambéry and just under an hour from Aix-les-Bains by car<sup>6</sup>. I wrote to Marguerite and she replied to me in a moving letter, declining the honor for which I had wanted to nominate her: "When I came to look for you and your sister Dora and your grandfather at Aix-les-Bains in order to take you to Maisons-Laffitte," she wrote me back, "I did so with all my heart without thinking for a single moment that my act might one day become the object of such an honor."

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<sup>6</sup> A significant element in the rest of my story, which I nonetheless did not know until my visit ten years later.

Three years later, a new occasion presented itself to honor Marguerite, or rather, her memory, since she passed away at the age of 83 in 1992, “the international day of the woman,” as Maud remarked. My temple was involved in a campaign to collect contributions in order to modernize the building which houses the community center. My wife and I made a contribution gift and asked that a classroom be dedicated to the memory of Marguerite. Our request having been granted, I invited Maud to come attend the inauguration of the new room. She preferred to send her son David, 17 years old because, she wrote me, “Future generations must never forget the sufferings imposed upon the Jewish people 50 years ago. This trip will be engraved into his [David’s] memory and will remind him to tell his friends, and later, his children, about the ceremony which he will have attended.” We thus had David come visit us, who was honored by the community gathered together for the inauguration of the classroom, with my family present, almost 50 years to the day after my rescue by Marguerite. We visited New York City together, and this nice, open-minded young man was particularly impressed by the visit to the aircraft-carrier “Intrepid.”

And then the years went by and I made promises to visit Saint Laurent du Pont without ever giving this planned trip the priority which it deserved, a fact which weighed heavily on me, and more so as the years came and went. In 1999 I was unable to attend David’s marriage because of vacationing with three of our young grandchildren. And then in 2000 we again exchanged the annual best wishes for the New Year. Nonetheless, in her reply, Maud inserted a small phrase: “I don’t regret not knowing you,” which woke me up like the sounding of reveille to a dozing man. I seized the first occasion, a weekend between a journey in Africa and a short trip to Great Britain, to announce to Maud and Patrick that I would pay them a friendly visit on the 1<sup>st</sup> of April, which they accepted with manifest joy.

I needed to find an appropriate gift. While walking to Montparnasse, I buy at a framer a relatively large-sized silk-screen print of Joan Miró which I bring with me in the high-speed train which takes me to Grenoble on the first of April.

Patrick and Maud await me at the station holding a sign that says “Welcome Daniel Vock.” The first contact is without surprise, warm and relaxed. En route to Saint Laurent, Maud proposes a program for the day to me, to have lunch in a restaurant and then a “Would you like to see Aix-les-Bains again this afternoon?” My heart leapt. I want to see the Hermitage again and exorcise it from my memory. Maud and Patrick live in a two-family home in the middle of a large garden which they share with Colette and Jean, Patrick’s parents, who are the owners. It is the vacation home *par excellence*: two apartments, and on the third floor, bedrooms for Maud’s and Patrick’s three sons, who are now grown men who have left the family home. After a pleasant lunch, we were off to Aix-les-Bains.

The view of the Lac du Bourget, of the Dent du Chat and Mont Revard in profile on the horizon bring back the memories which surge again in front of the square of the Hydropathic Establishment, which has greatly changed. I remember the first time that I saw German soldiers and women in uniform. The French dubbed them “the gray mice.”

The Hermitage is on the way to Moux, I am sure of that. But the distances seem to have shrunk by half. Having arrived at Moux, I realize that we had taken the wrong way. We get the correct directions. We go back down to Aix and turn right in front of the clinic, and we find ourselves nose to nose with the Hermitage, on the road with the same name.

The gateway which I last crossed 50 years ago, a young boy suffering from flu and in flight with the Gestapo close on my heels, is still there. And then I am seized by an emotion so deep that it is difficult to explain the intensity on paper. I am seeing again the scene of the arrest. Mother on her knees: "Sir, I beg of you, leave my little son, who is sick." The words ring once more in my ears. What must they have been thinking when they got into the car, surrounded by the Gestapo, headed for an unknown destination?

The main body of the Hermitage building has been redone but its dimensions remain the same. Maud points out to me that a man is standing in the courtyard beside a black vehicle. Curiosity overwhelms my feeling of unease, and we draw near to a man of about 40 years of age. I explain to him who we are and what led us to come visit the Hermitage on that day. He responds politely and appears to be very interested: "I bought this house two years ago," he tells us. "I had tried, without success, to get some information on the history of the Hermitage. Before that, I had been living in Lyon in a house which had served as a hiding place to Jean Moulin. I have been decidedly drawn to the dramas of the Occupation ever since." I explain the changes in ownership. The former chicken coop is now a garage. The pig pen (I have not forgotten the cries of the pig whose throat would be cut a few days before Christmas of 1943) had been destroyed but parts of the foundation serve as a retaining wall for a lawned terrace. After some comments about other neighboring buildings, Patrick takes a photo of the three of us: Maud, the owner of the Hermitage and myself. I would like to say more but I am overcome with emotion: all those things, did they really happen? Why am I here? We take our leave to go have a drink in a café nearby the Hydropathic Establishment, and I go into the first phone booth to call my Aunt Leah in Florida, forgetting for a moment that she owes her life to the circumstance fact that she was away from this place when the tragedy of December 23<sup>rd</sup> took place.

Back at Maud's and Patrick's home, Maud offers me a charcoal drawing by her own hand: it is the house on Avenue Belleforière. I wholeheartedly accept it. I shall hang it in a good spot behind my computer, a place where I spend a good part of each day. We exchange reflections upon that afternoon, rich with emotions. I muse over what finally pushed me to carry through with my planned trip to Saint-Laurent. Patrick supplies the response: "When I saw that Marguerite had written, 'I do not regret not knowing you,' I knew that you would come!" The little phrase again. I spend an agitated night, as did Maud, from what she told me the next morning. On Sunday we carry on with some errands in brilliant sunshine and a good family meal prepared by Colette. And then it was off by car for Lyon-Satolas, the airport. I comment that when the fates of our families cross, they pass through Lyon. "That's right," says Maud, "but if the trip of 1943 had ended in Lyon, you and I would not be here to talk about it."



How should I end my story? I have allowed an incarnation of the author to speak, telling the journey through the eyes of a 10-year-old boy, but only as a 67-year-old grandfather can I attempt to extract some lessons from the perspective of a life which is already long.

I know now that when danger and doomsday threaten, luck may still save you. Luck is as important in life as it is poorly shared. Napoleon recognized this when he said: “I don’t need a *good* general, I need a *lucky* general!” Luck was sometimes lacking in my life, having been deprived of the support and guardianship of my father from my birth, but luck has compensated me in ways that have allowed me to stay on top. How else to explain the fact that out of five of my close relatives sent to death by Convoy No. 66 with 1,139 other men, women and children, four of them were among the 47 survivors of that convoy in 1945? Among them was my mother, whose love and protection were so precious to me during my adolescent years, which followed the end of the war.

I believe that the greatest human qualities, generosity and courage in particular, are taught to us by our parents.

When a threat is inflicted upon an ethnic or social group, one can no longer count on one’s friends and relations, but for the exception, and the more friends one has, the better the chances are to meet that exception who will save your life. This message is equally true when one must face trials and tribulations in everyday life: looking for a job, or seeking to receive some form of preferential treatment.

In occupied France, the France of racist nationalism and denunciation but also of self-sacrifice and courage, there are white marks and black marks, but above all, a lot of gray.

With age, the past becomes an obsession; one fears that one will disappear without having paid one’s debts.

To know Marguerite, Maud and their family has done much to build in me a more positive moral appraisal of the human race. In man there exists both the best and the worst, but those who look for the best will be able to extricate themselves from difficult situations better than those who expect the worst. Pessimists are handicapped people<sup>7</sup>. There is also a problem of perception: crimes and atrocities fill the history books and make the front page of the newspapers. Generous acts are often anonymous, as are those who give them unstintingly.

In my own case, I have not kept an unpleasant memory of the years of occupation. I vaguely perceived the danger and risks, but, I was always surrounded by people who were well-disposed towards me, optimism was never lacking in me, and I lived more or less normally the tribulations of a 10-year-old child in occupied France, even despite the fact that I had been deprived of my only living parent. The contrast with my older brother, deported to Auschwitz at 14 years of age and who came back alive but

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<sup>7</sup> Even though, for the greater good of the arts and literature, they may be creative handicapped people !

profoundly marked, created in me a feeling of guilt which haunts me. It is well-known: all the survivors share this feeling.

Lastly, in attempting to reconstruct these events of the past, my thoughts keep turning to the goddess of Greek mythology Mnemosyne (*Memory*), mother of the Muses. We remain so much in the trance of this most elusive and sly of the many forces touching the fate of man. *Memory* is malleable like modeling clay, and that is why it cannot be trusted. The cult of this goddess should not be pushed too far. Capricious and selective, she retains nothing of what is gray or banal; only liking to accentuate the contrasts and to present us with finished snapshot memories. But what happened to all the rest? How else to explain why I remember nothing of my third crossing of the line of demarcation in 1944, while I have so many snapshot memories of my crossings in 1941 and 1943? *Memory* suppresses or distorts whatever is troublesome, succumbing not just to “political correctness” and outside influences, but also to the unknown boundaries each person has set within themselves.

This mysterious process strikes me when I watch certain programs on television that feature older persons relating stories involving themselves 50 years after the events they relate. Why, I wonder, didn't they speak up before? Have their stories changed over the years, depending on whether they told them five, ten, or 25 years after the events?<sup>8</sup>

And so I wonder, would my story have been different if I had written it 40 or 50 years earlier? I am sure it would have, and that raises endless questions.

R. Daniel Vock, alias VOVK, alias VOGUE; translated and adapted by Amy  
Lamborn with Daniel Vock  
Greenwich, CT, USA, January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2001

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<sup>8</sup> One film, more than any other testimony, perfectly illustrates my sentiments. That is “The Sorrow and the Pity” by Marcel Ophüls. This work, conceived towards the end of the 60s and which came out around 1970, is superior to other testimony about the Occupation, because it was [finished-réalisée] before Hollywood and *Memory* had somewhat transformed reality. It is a film which grants nothing to myth and holds first place in the genre. The witnesses speak therein with a freshness and a spontaneity which are somewhat lacking in works of a later date.